



Salil Chowdhury: A Phenomenon in Modern Bengali Music

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As a child in British India, he heard the working people's nocturnal songs in a tea garden in Assam, where his father was employed. And it was there that his father played on an old gramophone discs of European classical music left behind by a homebound philharmonic British colleague. The combination of these early memories must have left a deep impression on a child who later became Salil Chowdhury.

His father sent him later to his relatives in Bengal where young Salil started growing up in the rural milieu. He took up the bamboo flute, an instrument as essential to Bengali folk music as the Dotara or the Ektara. Salil was soon on his way to becoming a self-styled flutist—an identity his later compositions and modes of instrumentation were to bear witness to for a long time to come.

Extensive formal lessons in music, in the traditional sense, were not for him. His music lessons were essentially those accorded to him by his surroundings—the environment of Bengal where music grows like nature itself, myriad in its manifestations. He has always been, by and large, an autodidact and a collector of elements of music from all around. And he learned. Young Salil Chowdhury learned his lessons not only from the

music people make, but also from the life people live or have to live and then make music because of or in spite of it.

It is impossible to consider Salil Chowdhury's growth in music without taking into account his social and political engagements, his personality as a socio-cultural activist shaped in the 1940s. Music was Salil's expression. But it was his social and political environment that motivated him to express himself in words and music, in songs.

Barely beyond his teens, Salil Chowdhury faced the turmoils of the '40s: the final phase of the struggle for India's independence, the impact of the Second World War, especially its economic impact on the rural population of Bengal—the famine with all its ugly variations, the relief work and the organizational activities of the Communist Party of India.

By the time Salil Chowdhury was initiated to Marxist ideas and was going to college in Calcutta, he had already begun writing songs. His very early songs, though simple in structure, reveal a keen sense of the social situation of the rural population, especially the peasants and sharecroppers, exploited to the bone by the ruling classes. This young song-writer's journey to the left-wing political and cultural circles of Calcutta was that of a rural Bengali youth, bubbling with creative vigour, trying to make his way into the urban intellectual stronghold of the great metropolis. This entry was by no means easy and was not always rewarded with welcoming gestures. But the leaders of the Indian People's Theatre Association and the leading cultural activists must have recognized the great talent of this young man from Changripota (now Subhashgram in the 24 Parganas, West Bengal), and he did receive their encouragement.

In a relatively short time, Salil Chowdhury became a key figure in the left-wing cultural milieu where, in the '40s, IPTA reigned supreme. He was asked to compose suitable songs and perform them with his group of singers and musicians at all major gatherings and conventions. And Salil did have a song to fit any occasion, any important issue. These songs were directly politically motivated.

There had been politically motivated songs in Bengal long before Salil Chowdhury appeared on the scene. In urban Bengal they started taking shape in the 19th century and culminated in the compositions of Rabindranath Tagore and Dwijendralal Roy. Historically, Tagore and Roy were also the most important initiators of a new genre of songs—the modern Bengali song. Hence in verbal diction and musical idiom, the early, urban political songs, mostly patriotic in nature, were a part of modern Bengali song itself.

Rural Bengal also produced its own political songs, sometimes more radical in nature than their urban counterparts. In the matter of opposition

to British rule, political songs originating from rural Bengal (like those of Mukundodas) were verbally more direct and poignant than the 'modern' political songs emanating from Calcutta.

The early decades of the 20th century saw the rise of armed struggle of certain sections of the Indian population against British imperialism. This new political force, the brave struggle and self-sacrifice of the militants, their martyrdom and the ensuing police terror, not only sharpened the political situation of a nation under foreign yoke, but gave a new impetus to political songs as well. In Bengal, some of Kazi Nazrul Islam's songs ushered in a new age of political expression in music. The modern Bengali political song took a sharp turn toward direct expression of protest against and rejection of imperialism. Subversive and explosive lyrics combined with strongly accentuated rhythms and vigorous melodies with cutting ups and downs.

As the Indian Marxists started organizing peasants and workers and as the progressive elements of the Indian intelligentsia consciously started looking for new modes of literary and artistic expression to embody the condition and needs of the exploited masses—and also impart to the people, in general, a vision of liberation—a spate of new political songs came to be written. In Bengal, these songs, fruits of left-wing cultural activism in general and essentially popular in nature, have been known as *ganasangeet* (people's songs), a term denoting not only a particular genre but a movement as well. This movement of new political songs went hand in hand with the IPTA movement which was sending far-reaching throbs of refreshingly youthful creativity throughout India in the '40s and '50s.

When Salil Chowdhury arrived on the scene with his own compositions, he was already a product of the afore-described history, with IPTA as his historic platform. It would be ungrateful not to mention in the context of IPTA and its activism in new political music in Bengal the names of Jyotirindra Moitra, Binoy Roy, Haripada Kushari and Hemanga Biswas. With their own contributions to the stream of political songs, they were Salil Chowdhury's mentors. Their compositions were, more or less, examples that were readily available to Salil Chowdhury as he became a part of the movement. Another thing that IPTA offered Salil Chowdhury was its series of conferences which took place in different parts of India. In a certain interview Salil Chowdhury has recalled that these IPTA conferences were somewhat like open universities where so many interesting things could be picked up. Musicians from all over India came and performed at these gatherings and Salil, the innate collector and learner, would be listening hard, taking in elements of the endless varieties of subcontinental music, certain phrases of which he would cheerfully adapt to his own needs in his

compositions. An example: the opening movement of his famous political song *Manbona e bondhone, manbona e srinkhole* is an adaptation of a tune Salil Chowdhury heard in Andhra Pradesh. Like his great predecessor, Rabindranath, Salil has utilized, in his long career in music, a broad range of musical influences from disparate sources, modifying them, reshaping them and thus making them his own.

In one of his most-remembered early protest songs, *Bicharpoti tomar bichar korbe jara*, a song against the brutality of British justice in its judgement of Indian freedom-fighters, Salil Chowdhury took as his leitmotiv a popular Bengali *kirtan* tune, traditionally devotional in character, and laced it with an openly political text, transforming an old melody of devotion into a statement of explosive protest and anger. It is interesting to note that this same *kirtan* motif had been adapted in a song by Rabindranath for a completely different purpose. In his song, *Bhenge mor ghorer chabi*, Rabindranath used the intimate and personal aspect of the traditional tune. Many years later, Ustad Vilayat Khan, in his Sitar improvisations on the same tune, cashed in on the same aspect again. But Salil Chowdhury impregnated the melody line with political message, replaced the soft intimate contours with sharp edges—and a new song with a new identity was born from the womb of the old. The soft intimacy of a folk melody was suddenly transformed into the battle cry of an oppressed people. With this one treatment of a traditional tune Salil chronicled the changes that occur in the attitudes of a people toward its past and present and also those that necessarily take place in the body of music due to changed social circumstances. First performed in 1945 at the Rangpur students' conference, *Bicharpoti* still remains one of the most popular agitprop songs both in West Bengal and in Bangladesh.

Between 1945 and 1950 Salil Chowdhury composed some of his most important political songs. They were important both in their political impact and in their textual, tonal and structural novelty which proclaimed this young composer's uniqueness. The lyrics were clear, unequivocally direct and consistent in their themes. Moreover, Salil's lyrics manifested a significant poetic skill. Seldom before had a Bengali lyricist addressed the burning issues of his times in songs written with such an acute sense of immediacy, powerful imagery, and such a wealth of vocabulary.

But all these powerful lyrics would have been a waste, had it not been for the structures of the songs. Salil Chowdhury's song structures and his unique modes of phrasing words, melodies and rhythm patterns probably constitute the key to understanding his uniqueness. These are the most significant characteristics that set him apart as a composer from most of his contemporaries.

As a composer of modern Bengali songs in the '40s and the '50s, Salil Chowdhury had to face the formidable challenge embodied in the works of his great forerunners: Rabindranath Tagore, Dwijendralal Roy, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Himangsu Dutta. The first three were composers as well as lyricists, while Himangsu Dutta was only a composer. These four composers and lyricists had explored, with a great number and variety of songs, countless modes of musical expression, and had created idioms and patterns unknown before their times. They had experimented with almost all musical elements and materials, available far and near, and had shown a broadness of mind and boldness of spirit that remains unique in the history of modern music and that of 'song' in general. Bengali folk music, Hindustani *ragas*, south Indian modalities, European music—both classical and popular—anything and everything was welcome to them as long as the raw material contributed to the making of a new song. In modern Bengali song between the late 19th century and the end of the '40s, the East had already met the West, long before such a term became fashionable in the culture industry in the early '70s. The nascent spirit of modern India had discovered itself in terms of its own endless wealth of music and had reached out for distant shores in search of newer musical experiences, thus enriching its own. Rabindranath, in a conversation with Dilip Kumar Roy, the eminent son of Dwijendralal Roy, had already spelt out the ultimate challenge of new Bengali music:

Should we then await the verdict of a special tribunal to find out what belongs to the Bengalis and what does not? Listen, if European music has flavoured your father's songs, what's so wrong about it? Blind imitation would be wrong, but *not* assimilation. Europe has been our neighbour for some two hundred years now. Well, are we stones or barbarians that we should turn down its gifts?

In the '40s, Salil Chowdhury had the historic advantage of having such courageous pioneers in experimental music behind him. But it was the image of those same pioneers that must have stood before him, posing a great challenge to a young composer who had to prove his merit or accept the unsavoury epithet of a minor composer.

The most interesting feature of Salil Chowdhury's compositions in the '40s and early '50s is that he refused to follow any definite pattern or to be confined in any category which others could call 'typically Salil'. Every composition he made revealed a new face of the composer. He reintroduced rhythm variation in the body of a single song, a technique first introduced in modern Bengali song by Rabindranath, but virtually left unexplored by the other major composers after him. Salil Chowdhury departed from the accepted norms of modern Bengali song structure by

writing complex phrases of a single movement which unfolded itself sometimes over several lines of the lyric. This was a revolutionary innovation indeed, since the prevailing tendency had been to conform to the pattern of having one melody line, or at the most two, for a unit of lyric lines constituting each segment of the song. In Salil's compositions, musical information in terms of application of notes, their combinations and movements, acquired a totally new dimension. The ways in which he phrased and scanned his melody lines along with the inner movements of the rhythms he chose, vigorously syncopated them and relentlessly explored the possibilities of tonal expressions, permanently changed the face of modern Bengali song. Constant experiments with song structures have always been Salil's preoccupation—a characteristic that sets him conspicuously apart from almost all other Indian composers in the post-Tagore era.

Great artists create problems for themselves and then look for elegant solutions. This was exactly what Salil Chowdhury did. Most of his songs contain a plethora of melodious problems he created for himself, as though challenging his own capacities, problems he then solved with just a few strokes of a deft hand busy carving out new patterns of progress in music. Each of his songs, written and composed in the '40s and '50s, is a separate experience in itself.

But probably the most striking experience in modern Indian songs had to wait until Salil Chowdhury put to tune a long poem by Satyendranath Dutta and a few others by Sukanta Bhattacharya. Here, he had the historic challenge of making songs out of poems which were never meant to become songs in the first place. *Palkir gan* and *Runner*, to name just two, became two separate studies in modern composition. Rabindranath, that impossible wizard who was constantly minting so many firsts-of-their-kind in modern Indian music, did make a masterly debut in putting long poems to tune. But Salil Chowdhury's compositions contained different information altogether. They were utterly unknown experiences not only in terms of lyric but—more importantly for composition—in terms of structural modalities. The important difference was in the presence of a variety of inner musical themes, sometimes quite disparate in their tonal information, within the outer boundary of the central motif. Even the intelligent rhythm and tempo variations, a musical delight in themselves, accompanying the shifts in imagery and moods of these poems, pale in front of the stupendous array of tonal motifs and themes which arrive, establish themselves, and then smoothly dissolve into another, thus gradually revealing a total panorama of tone pictures and colours, bound together in sovereign cohesion. The degree of Salil Chowdhury's musical imagination and his authority over his

tools and materials becomes equally apparent when one considers that he undertook, in both these songs, several extremely complex feats of tonic changes (*kharaj paribartan*). Tonic change, a regular and important feature of European music and widely ignored in Hindustani classical music, though the provisions are there, had already been experimented with in modern Bengali songs by Rabindranath Tagore, Dwijendralal Roy and Himangsu Dutta, albeit on a rather limited scale. But in Salil Chowdhury's compositions, tonic changes occurred in considerably wider and much more intricate applications, imparting the delightful effect of a chain of songs within a song. His compositional treatment of Sukanta's poem *Runner* may well be compared to a serious symphony, though on a much more limited scale, owing to the fact that he was composing a song and not an orchestral piece.

Elements of orchestral composition were very much there in his songs, especially in those which did not use the idioms of folk music. And it was just a matter of time for Salil Chowdhury to use real orchestral back-up on a larger scale. In composing the instrumental parts, the preludes and interludes as well as the accompaniment, he started showing as much unique imaginativeness as he did in his songs. And it was as a *total producer* of modern songs—as lyricist, composer, as well as orchestral arranger—that Salil Chowdhury emerged as the most important figure in post-Tagore Bengal. This unity of the three very important capacities is, in fact, highly noteworthy. Since the '30s, the production of modern songs in Bengal, especially in the culture industry, has been marked by a division of labour. The lyricist and the composer have not necessarily been the same person. With the passage of time, the divided responsibilities have tended to become the rule rather than the exception. The introduction of the orchestra in recording brought in its wake another personality that was previously unknown—the arranger. Systematic practice of this division of labour, an historic product of the capitalist mode of song production in the Indian culture industry, has consolidated all over India the typical constellation of three personalities to a song: the lyricist, the composer, and the arranger. Salil Chowdhury had to give up his lyricist identity when he started working for the film industry in Bombay and in South India primarily for reasons of language. But in Bengali songs—apart from those in which he collaborated with other Indian composers like Hridaynath Mangeshkar—he has, by and large, maintained his three-in-one identity, which is exceptional in contemporary popular music in India.

It is true that back-up orchestra had been used in India long before Salil Chowdhury came on the scene. But most of the pre-Salil orchestra work in Bengali songs on gramophone discs was simple accompaniment or, at best,

a kind of instrumental respite. In some exceptional cases the accompanying orchestra did display a richness of sound, but very seldom did it have any statement to make of its own. In Salil Chowdhury's work the orchestra achieved its much needed liberation. He accorded the accompanying instruments the status of voices capable of making statements to qualify or modify those made by the human voice. He started *voicing* his instruments. This did not, of course, happen overnight, but it did happen soon enough after the Gramophone Company started recording Salil Chowdhury's songs. Should one listen to the recorded versions of his songs chronologically, one could easily trace the growth of his thoughts and work in instrumentation and orchestration. His early discs impart a sense of economy regarding instrumental back-up. But despite the quantitative thinness of the accompaniment, a qualitative difference can be noticed. It can be clearly seen that, economy notwithstanding, the instruments are trying to say something on their own. They are neither repeating the song, nor are they just embellishing it. Rather, they are supplementing the melody of the song with related or independent lines of melody. This gives the disc versions of Salil Chowdhury's songs a dramatic dimension that was absent before.

One of the salient features of Salil Chowdhury's instrumentation has always been his own way of using rhythms, percussion, and percussive instruments. He clearly defines the rhythms and the rhythmic thrusts of his songs with instruments, sometimes a whole group of instruments, more suited to the purpose than just a Tabla which had been, for a long time, the standard rhythm instrument used in the production of modern Bengali songs. His innovative application of percussions other than the obligatory Tabla in the early '50s was not only a welcome relief but a pioneering work as well. Moreover, he sharpened and enhanced the edge of the rhythm by using the piano which, in many of his early recordings, played rhythmic chords, accentuating the percussiveness of the accompaniment. In one of his songs in the late '50s or early '60s, *Surer ei jhorna*, Salil used group strings as percussive accompaniment—an experiment which was surely the first of its kind in the subcontinent. In that same song he introduced, for the first time too, the technique of a dialogue between the lead singer and the accompanying chorus. He had already done successful experiments in harmonized choral singing before, but this particular song, in its recorded form, was a different matter altogether. Here the chorus is a harmonized vocal back-up as well as a separate entity by itself. In the second movement of the song, the '*antara*', there is a sudden reversal of roles. It is the chorus that takes the lead while the lead voice replies and resolves the tension resulting from the inversion of the voice set-up. This was, again, a major

experimental departure from the traditional and accepted norms of vocal arrangement in which the lead voice asserted its leading role throughout the song with the chorus condemned to a marginal existence. As the vocal dialogue goes on in *Surer ei jhorna*, a single accordion supplies yet another line of continuous run, adding a third dimension to the tonal picture. If one puts all these elements and factors together, one gets to know the mind of a composer who has constantly been trying to reshape his work and heighten the dramatic impact of his songs.

By shifting his place of work from Calcutta to Bombay in the '50s, Salil Chowdhury also moved out of the phase of direct political statement in song. It would, however, be wrong to assume that his lyrics took leave of left-wing politics or social concerns. Moreover, despite the preponderance of political lyrics, Salil had also written songs in which politics was not the principal motivation. And it was this type of lyricism that tended to prevail in his work from the '60s. Along with the changing dimensions of his lyrics, there came newer dimensions of his music. His exposure to wider horizons and varied experiences in the large film world of Bombay and later south India brought fresh challenges which he met by expanding and sharpening his compositional capacities. This was the period in which Salil Chowdhury's modes of composition and orchestration became more influenced by Western classical music, on the one hand, and Hindusthani *ragas* on the other. It is interesting to note the growth of a young composer who came from rural Bengal with a flute in his hand, leaning heavily on folk music in the beginning. That young man travelled a long way to become almost a classicist, using wide and deep strings and horns with movements strongly resembling those of a classical Western orchestra and, at the same time, composing nostalgic tunes in Bageshri and Kalavati as well. Salil Chowdhury's treatment of and compositions in several *ragas* are as remarkable and as uniquely his own as his experiments with Western classical music. But, as observed before, Salil methodically refused to follow any convenient line of action. He refused to be satisfied with any definite mode of musical expression. His occasional flirtations with Mozart, his experiments with the relative minor and major scales which have been seminally important in their impact on modern Indian music, his adaptations of the melodies of *Soviet land so dear to every toiler* or even *Happy birthday to you*, which he reworked into quite a serious song, *Klanti name go*, his encounters with west Indian rhythms like Lavani, his deep attachment to the nostalgic tone colours of Khamaj, his sudden composition in Hamsadhvani in Ektal—nothing in particular can define him.

The compositional variety Salil Chowdhury has shown in music has tended to surpass his lyric art with the passage of time. His lyrics have

sometimes betrayed, despite the strong overall appeal of his songs, an unfortunate inconsistency of language. In written Bengali, the so called 'chaste form' (*sadhu bhasha*) of verb declination has been effectively discarded long ago. The living everyday language, the language of contemporary literature and that of the media, are generally free from all traces of archaic forms. From the '50s, the tendency has been towards adoption of colloquialism and this has rapidly grown stronger with time. But in modern Bengali songs the lyric has somehow retained, though not always, a linguistic archaism for a painfully long time. Some lyrists have, of course, tried to avoid the inertia of archaism as much as possible, especially since the '60s. But due to the absence of any strong tradition of music criticism and rather uncritical public acceptance, archaic forms and worn-out phrases have survived in the modern Bengali lyric with an alarming tenacity. It is not at all uncommon to find colloquialism sitting right next to a devastating archaism—something which would never be forgiven in modern Bengali literature. This persistent archaism and its annoying coexistence with colloquialism is not only illogical but absurd, especially when encountered in a contemporary and urban musical idiom, with modern orchestration and all. It is rather disturbing that even in the late '70s and early '80s, examples of such contradictions could be found scattered in some of Salil Chowdhury's songs. The fact that this self-contradictory mixture of archaism and modernism has always been present in a lot of modern Bengali songs cannot justify the appearance of such anachronism in the lyrics of a composer like Salil Chowdhury who has otherwise changed and revolutionized the modern Bengali song.

However, from the '60s right up to the '80s, when most of the recorded modern Bengali songs revealed a surprising indifference to the society out of which they grew, Salil Chowdhury's lyrics offered, from time to time, perceptible indications of social awareness and concern. His songs and lyrics never failed to address important social issues and maladies which almost all other established Bengali lyrists of our times have methodically excluded from their work. One of the most memorable examples is a song recorded by his daughter, Antara, in the '70s. In that song, a little girl asks her mother to tell her a different story—and not one that starts with the customary 'Once upon a time there was a king and a queen . . .' The girl keeps asking her mother, with a child's innocence, questions which are essentially explosive. Questions about social injustice, the evils of a society divided into haves and have-nots, which may well appear strange and unreasonable to children. Salil Chowdhury wrote this song, essentially critical and political in nature, from a child's point of view—an attempt which no other established Bengali lyrist is known to have made.

Composing songs for children is another exemplary aspect of Salil Chowdhury's contribution to our music. In the '70s and early '80s he composed a series of songs for children, imbued with a wonderful sense of fun, highly interesting lyrics, melodies and orchestral work. In fact from the '70s and, increasingly, in the early '80s, Salil Chowdhury's instrumentation underwent some evident reorientation. The classicist tended to go pop. The instrumental idiom of the then popular Western music, which has created a new international soundscape with electronic and synthesized sounds, found increasing applications in Salil Chowdhury's work. This, added to the audibly enhanced role of chord progression, sent new vibrations through his music. In fact, this is probably a feature which has greatly influenced contemporary Bengali modern music in general. Always in love with movement, Salil has rerecorded a collection of his old political songs with new arrangements in the '80s. Though refreshingly experimental in character, some of the arrangements do betray the weakness of exaggeration, with the vocal overtures sometimes conjuring up the image of some philharmonic young people singing happily on their way to a picnic rather than political protest. His applications of vocal harmony in this collection, *Ghum bhangar gan* (Songs of Awakening), though displaying his sovereign authority over the techniques of harmony, do not always do justice to the purpose of these songs, should there be any.

Despite a few interesting additions, the present decade is proving to be the master's lean years. Is this a sign of fatigue? Lack of any motivation other than commercial? Has he also become a victim of the general decay pervading, of late, the entire soundscape of modern Indian music? Another question could be equally pertinent: How much can one expect of a composer who has, over several decades, generated most of the important accents in modern Bengali as well as Indian music—and for how long? □